



MASSACHUSETTS 01720

ACTON HISTORICAL COMMISSION

Acton Planning Board
472 Main Street
Acton, MA

Dear Planning Board Members,

The Historical Commission reviewed the proposed plan for the development of land that borders Mount Hope Cemetery and that will include several residences, known as the Central Street Planned Conservation Residential Community (referred to herein as the “Development”). Based on the materials furnished for our review and visits to the cemetery, the Commission has significant reservations about the Development due to the impact that it will have on the Town’s cultural and historic resources. Our primary objections to the Development correspond to several sections of the Development Impact Report (DIR) filed for the Development that misrepresent or fail to recognize the state of the cultural and historic resources that will be impacted, as described below:

DIR Item 15 – Unique Features

The members of our Commission have walked the perimeter of the proposed residential portion of the Development and have discovered two quarries on the southwest side that were excavated for either sand or gravel. It appears that the materials were removed over a road and bridge that extended in from Willow Street. These quarries are not noted in the DIR.

DIR Item 18 – Scenic Vistas

Mount Hope Cemetery, established c.1848, directly abuts the Development. Importantly from an historical perspective, the natural setting is a critical aspect of the Mount Hope Cemetery chapel, which was erected in 1909 and sits just southeast of the first proposed house in the Development. This setting will be lost if the Development is allowed to proceed. Moreover, northeast of the chapel lies the Grand Army of the Republic (G.A.R.) burial lot. This lot was sold by the Town of Acton to Isaac Davis Post 138, G.A.R., and today it remains the focal point of the Town’s Memorial Day Ceremony. As planned, the Development would encroach upon and destroy the back portion of this G.A.R. lot. The woodland setting provides the quiet and appropriate setting for both the chapel and G.A.R. lot, but between the proposed houses and access roadway, this setting will be lost if the Development proceeds as currently contemplated.

To protect the scenic vista that is an integral part of the chapel and the G.A.R. lot, we propose that, at a minimum, a buffer area of no less than 100 feet in width be incorporated into the Development plans in order to preserve the views to and from such historic elements of the cemetery.

DIR Item 23 – Sites of Archaeological or Historical Significance

Please be advised that the applicant answered “No” but in fact has never communicated with the Acton Historical Commission to check for potential historical impacts, as required by the DIR form. Some of the important historical resources that will be adversely affected by the Development are detailed above. In addition, with respect to potential archeological significance, it was common in earlier times to bury residents who died of contagious disease on the edge of cemetery properties, and therefore there may be burial sites in the area that would be disturbed by the Development. If any such burial sites are discovered, it could trigger a number of potential processes involving state and local officials.

As previously noted, the plan for the Development overlaps a portion of the G.A.R. soldiers lot, including two of the four granite markers (each with “GAR” on the surface) that delineate the lot. In addition, the survey prepared for the Development seems to take (and require demolition of) a structure behind the Mount Hope chapel that is about 20 feet square and is presently utilized for storage by the Town of Acton Cemetery Department. We are aware that there has been a structure at this location since 1897, when the Town of Acton voted to construct a tool shed. According to historic plans for Mount Hope Cemetery, this building lies within the cemetery boundaries.

DIR Item 24 – Contiguity with or Inclusion in an Historic District or National Register District

Once again, the applicant’s “No” response to this question is misleading. In fact, Mount Hope Cemetery was placed on the Massachusetts Historical Commission’s (“MHC”) resource list in 1990, and several years ago it was examined by MHC and determined to be eligible for listing on the National Register of Historic Places. Currently, the Acton Historical Commission is in the process of completing a survey of Mount Hope Cemetery to provide the necessary information to formalize the National Register listing application. Among the noteworthy elements of this cemetery survey are the G.A.R. lot, the chapel in its present setting and the “Town Tomb” at the cemetery entrance adjacent to the proposed entrance for the Development.

This Commission believes that, as proposed, the Development will have a significant, negative impact on the historical and cultural resources of Mount Hope Cemetery. We also have substantial questions about whether the lot lines reflected in the plans for the Development are factually accurate, and what overall impact the Development would have on the tranquility of the cemetery, but we will rely on the Cemetery Commission to elaborate on those issues.

Respectfully submitted,

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cc: Acton Board of Selectmen
Acton Historic District Commission
Ms. Brona Simon, SHPO & Executive Director, Massachusetts Historical Commission